
Slovak Peasants in Hungary Prior to World War I

By Kenneth Janda

By the middle of the 19th century, serfdom had formally ended in Hungary, becoming replaced by a system of peasantry. The terms “serf” and “peasant” are not well defined, even in scholarly usage. Historian E. L. S. Knox wrote, “[S]ources are not in the least bit consistent in how they use these terms.”¹ The main distinction between the two systems revolved around the degree of freedom exercised by serfs versus peasants. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defined serfdom as a condition “in which a tenant farmer was bound to a hereditary plot of land and to the will of his landlord.”² Working the land separated serfs from slaves, “who were bought and sold without reference to a plot of land.” But like a slave, a serf “could not permanently leave his holding or his village without his lord’s permission. Neither could the serf marry, change his occupation, or dispose of his property without his lord’s permission. He was bound to his designated plot of land and could be transferred along with that land to a new lord.” In short, serfs had no personal liberties.

In contrast, Knox defined a peasant as “someone who lived in a village or some other rural setting and who was more or less free.”³ Writers usually distinguished peasants from serfs by stressing their land ownership.⁴ In *The Peasantry of Europe*, Werner Roesener cited five criteria defining a peasant: (1) plants fields and raises cattle; (2) produces as an autonomous economic entity [i.e., not for a lord]; (3) cultivates with a plough; (4) others do not share in his produce; and (5) personally works the land with family members.⁵ But Roesener continued: “In addition to these purely economic criteria there are traits that project an image of the peasant rooted in every day speech: they have to do above all with the way rustics live and behave.”⁶ The term, “peasant,” was—and still is—used pejoratively to describe someone “uneducated, ignorant, and unfamiliar with the more sophisticated mannerisms of the urban population.”⁷

As reported in an earlier issue of *Naše rodina*,⁸ Empress Maria Theresa of Austria-Hungary in 1767 issued an Urbarial Patent (Proclamation of Landed Property)

that attempted to end serfdom and promote peasantry by defining the normative size of peasant holdings and regulating peasant obligations.⁹ Among these obligations was *corvée*, required unpaid labor owed to the lord of the manor who claimed the land on which the peasant supposedly own his own plot. Given their obligations, peasants in Austria-Hungary still resembled serfs. Eva Somogyi held that serfdom was not formally abandoned until April 1848, spurred by revolutionary forces in the empire. Even then, detailed regulations to end serfdom were not enacted until the 1853 Labor Patent.¹⁰ Such regulations were needed, for Somogyi wrote, “The freeing of the serfs involved the freeing of 14.4 million acres held as fiefs, and the state was to pay compensation for these to the lords.” The administrative task was considerable: “According to more-or-less accurate calculations, 1,366,749 peasant families tied to landlords lived in Hungary at the time of the revolution. Almost half of these became free owners of their lands.”¹¹

This short discussion of terms and historical survey provides background for assessing peasantry in Hungary prior to World War I.¹² The term “peasant” applies most properly to farmers or farm laborers in pre-industrial societies. It conjures up images of field hands toiling for large landowners, a view better fitted to medieval Europe, when masses of workers tended vast fields owned by landlords. By the turn of the century, more than a million individuals owned and managed farms on small plots of land tucked into the rolling hills of the Hungarian countryside.

Certainly, by the 20th century, being a “peasant” was more likely to indicate one’s low place in society than one’s position in the agricultural economy. Keely Stauter-Halsted’s study of peasants in Galicia in Austria-Hungary included those “actively involved in working the soil as a primary occupation, or whose family and hence cultural identity are attached to work on the land and to interactions within the village community.”¹³ In that sense, Hungary at the time definitely had peasants.

Historian Bernard Wasserstein wrote that even by 1914 the peasant was “the representative European social type” and “the village the basic social milieu.”¹⁴ Village life was brutish compared with even poor city-dwellers, “Hardly any villages had paved ways, electricity, or piped water.”

Clothing was simple, often sordid and filthy. The colourful ‘traditional’ costumes that we associate with peasant life in east-central Europe were worn only on special occasions; in some cases, they were nationalist revivals, in oth-

ers inventions. In the more prosperous country areas of Britain, France, and Germany ready-made clothing was becoming available by 1914, under garments were increasingly popular, and nightgowns were replacing unchanged day-clothes in bed. Elsewhere clothing was generally home-made spun and sewn by women or woven by men. Most male peasants wore undyed, colourless smocks or floppy shirts over loose trousers. Worn clothes were patched rather than replaced. Children would wear hand-downs. Washing of clothes, as of persons, was rare.¹⁵

Wasserman also noted that better-off men might have one Sunday suit, which often lasted the rest of their lives, while poorer peasants dressed in rags and sometimes lacked shoes. If they had shoes, they were often worn mainly to church. As for housing:

Rural housing remained rudimentary. Poor peasants, sharecroppers, and landless labourers might live in mud huts or log cabins with dirt floors. Outside western Europe glass windows were found only in more recently built homes.¹⁶

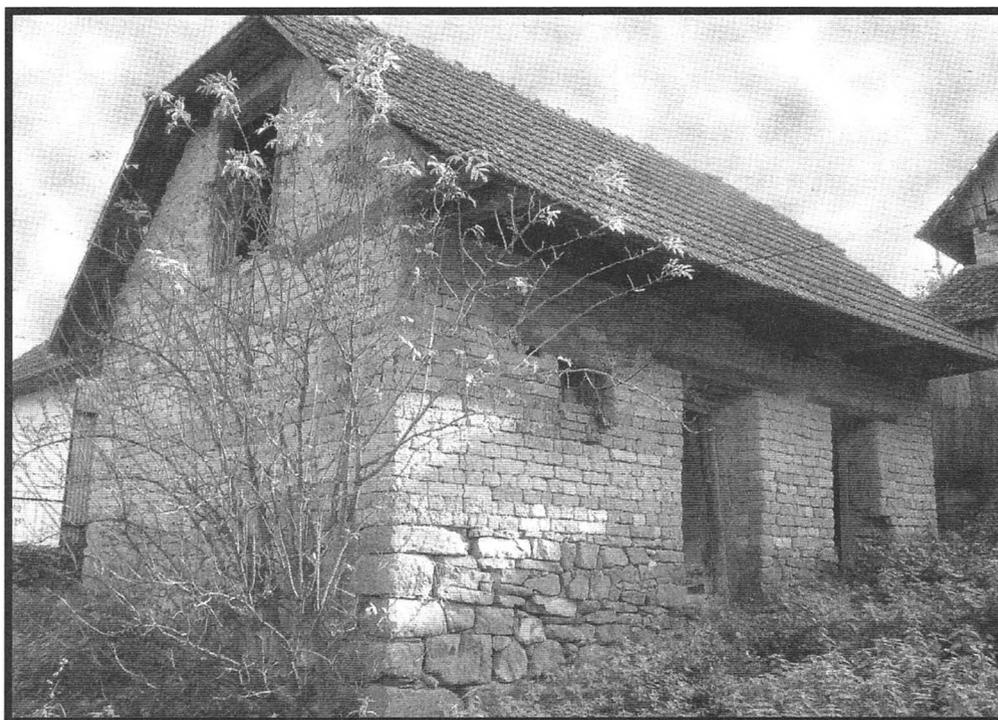
Zuzana Bielikova and Ján Kubiček devote several pages describing the construction of peasant cottages

from mud bricks on stone foundations and provide a photograph of an early example in Figure 1.¹⁷

Few Hungarian peasants owned any land, and most who did owned very little. According to one source, just 0.2 percent of all proprietors had property of 1,000 acres or more, and that consumed over 30 percent of all the land.¹⁸ Over half of all proprietors had plots under five acres, accounting for less than 6 percent of total acreage. Ference cited 1896 data showing that 36 percent of Hungarian land was held by 800 families in holdings of 1,000 or more acres in 1896.¹⁹ About half of farmers (52 percent) worked farms of five acres or less. Analyzing the 1896 data in another way (and with more precision than either necessary or defensible), Spietz found:

9.44% of the population as landless, 11.53% with less than 1.5 acres, 31.1% with 1.5 to 5 acres, 21.26% with 5 to 10 acres, 16.9% with 10 to 20 acres, and 7.6% with 20 to 50 acres. There were 1,529 estate owners with 100 to 200 acres, 768 with 200 to 500 acres, and 806 with more than 1,000 acres.²⁰

In 1910, according to Spiesz, the large landholders in Slovakia specifically were mainly Magyars. They also owned the commercially productive larger farms,



Peasant House in Konkušova Valley Outside the Village of Krajné. Zuzana Bielikova and Ján Kubiček, Krajné v spomienkach [Krajné Memories] (Krajné, Slovakia: City of Krajné, 2010), p. 12.

while Slovaks owned the small plots suited to subsistence farming. Figure 2 portrays the distribution of landholdings by size and nationalities. Magyars owned over 80 percent of the largest holdings; Slovaks owned over 70 percent of the smallest holdings. Spietz described Slovakia as “essentially a country of small farms and large landed estates.”

Hungarian peasants farming small plots lived under the thumbs of wealthy and influential personages called “magnates,” a Latin-based term referring to people with great landed wealth and high social position. Back in 1900, the American press called John D. Rockefeller a

Magnates’ influence was reasserted in an 1848 public law that created a new Diet with a House of Representatives and a House of Lords, known informally but widely as the House of Magnates. Their influence continued over time. One source said that in 1896 its members consisted of:

17 archdukes, 29 Catholic and 8 Orthodox or Byzantine bishops, 10 high Protestant clergy, 7 dukes, 143 counts and 41 barons, all from among the Hungarian nobility, and lastly, 75 life-time appointees of the king.²³

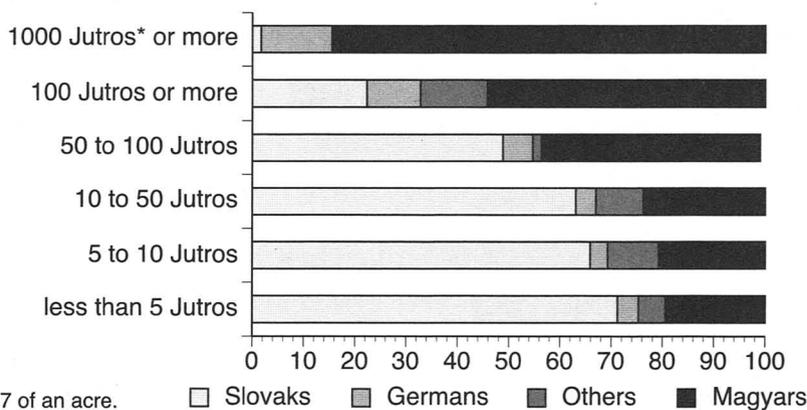
The House of Representatives was scarcely more representative of the population. As shown in Figure 3, only about 30 percent of the Representatives who served from 1887 to 1910 were “commoners,” and a majority were nobles with historical titles.

How many magnates were there in Hungary? Estimates vary, but most writers fixed the number at less than 5 percent of the population.²⁴ Despite their small numbers, magnates held approximately 20 percent of the land; again, estimates vary.²⁵ Magyar landowners treated their peasants poorly, regardless of the peasants’ nationality. The celebrated Magyar writer, MórícZ Zsig-

mund, wrote about the harsh life of Magyar peasants. His 1917 novel, *A Fáklya (The Torch)*, focused on the life of a new Calvinist minister in a Magyar village. A local teacher explained why Magyar peasants were so obstinate:

They have been educated to this for many centuries. Their taskmasters stood with the lash behind their backs, and the peasants learned to bite as well as to bark. They have been exploited and now they are paying back the debt. They are more enlightened and more civilized than other peasants and it is the inexcusable crime of our governing classes that instead of elevat-

Figure 2: Distribution of Landholdings in Hungary by Size and Nationality

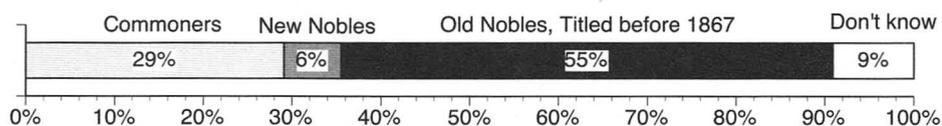


*A "jutro" is 0.7 of an acre.

Source: Anton Spietz, “The Era of a Dual Monarchy (1867-1918),” in Ladislaus J. Bolchazy (ed.), *Illustrated Slovak History: A Struggle for Sovereignty in Central Europe* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2006), p. 173.

magnate, and the term is sometimes applied to industry leaders today. However, we seldom think of magnates as a political group pursuing common interests. Not so in Hungary. Writings on Hungarian politics from medieval times to the early twentieth century referred to the magnates’ organized influence. Magnates arose from the few dozen great landowners and nobles in the 15th century who provided private armies to support the king.²¹ A parliamentary act in 1608 created a bicameral legislature, the Diet, consisting of a Magnates’ Table and a Lower Table. The Magnate’s Table included the aristocracy, ecclesiastical leaders, and descendants of powerful landowners—often overlapping categories.²²

Figure 3: Social Composition of Hungary's House of Representatives, 1887-1910



Calculated for 1,121 Includes deputies serving from the years 1887-1892, 1897-1901, and 1910-18. Data from Table 16 in Andrew C. Janos, *The Politics of Backwardness in Hungary, 1825-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 137.

ing them to their own level they want to push them back into the mire where the peasantry of other countries is floundering. Primarily it is the crime of our aristocrats.²⁶

Later, the minister from a nearby town elaborated:

The gentry rule, friend, merely carries out the will of the landed barons, and the barons are not even grateful for the help. . . . The burghers are the real supporters of the gentry, because they are ignorant of the real situation. And the gentry disdain the burghers, which is sufficient cause for the burghers to idolize the gentry. . . . They are part of the political gang that monopolizes public offices in this country.²⁷

Few Slovaks held public office, and their Magyar rulers certainly understood that Slovak peasants lived even worse lives than Magyar peasants, but their rulers also did not care. Scholar Suzanna Mikula estimated that around that time, among 46,449 people who “had positions of civil authority in Slovakia, only 132 acknowledged themselves as Slovaks.”²⁸ This fits with Gregory Ferenc’s statement: “In 1910, “Slovaks accounted for only 184 out of 3,683 judicial officials throughout Hungary and 164 among the remaining 6,185 Hungarian governmental employees.”²⁹ In villages like Krajné, the office of notary “collected taxes, conducted elections (which were by open balloting), and in general oversaw the public affairs of the people. Of 5,313 notaries in Slovakia, only 38 were Slovaks.”³⁰

Some Slovaks became Magyarones—assimilated Magyars—for status and profit. In his 1906 book, *The Slovaks of Hungary*, Thomas Čapek wrote, “notaries are uncompromising apostles of Magyarization.”

In many instances, he is the local postmaster, and keeps a record of births, marriages, and deaths. The notary, by reason of his official position, possesses information within reach of no other inhabitant in the place. Nothing escapes him. He knows accurately what newspapers and books you read, whether you order your goods from “patriotic” or Slavonian firms. The

local priests and teachers, if they be Slovaks, must be on guard before the notary, knowing that he watches and reports their every action. Even the butcher, the innkeeper, and the tailor find it profitable to court the notary’s favor. Elections without his assistance or interference are unthinkable.³¹

Consider the case of Alojz Nozdrovický, notary in the small village of Krajné in Nitra County. Nozdrovický, whose name was apt to be ethnically Slovak rather than Magyar, was appointed in 1899 and held office until 1919. Ján Lukačka’s history of Krajné reported that notary Nozdrovický and his all-powerful wife „decided everything“ prior to the end of World War I.³² But in Krajné—as perhaps in Slovak villages all over Hungary—change came abruptly with the end of the war.

Lukačka wrote that Krajné’s villagers in November 1918 understood what all Europe knew: the Austro-Hungarian Empire had collapsed, Hungary had collapsed with it, and Slovaks had joined Czechs in a new nation, Czechoslovakia. According to Lukačka, the villagers’ “proverbial Slovakian timidity” also collapsed. Soldiers returning home “stripped themselves of all Hungarian insignia” and then rushed to the local tavern to drink. Soon, they focused on the local Magyarone notary, Alojz Nozdrovický, who for almost twenty years collected taxes, conducted elections (done openly, not with secret ballots), and generally ran the town.

Angry people then turned against the notary Nozdrovický and his family. Enraged soldiers came to the council house demanding tobacco. They searched the notary’s apartment, leaving after finding tobacco and sugar. The next morning the notary came to the [Lutheran] rectory

with his whole family, with a request that [Pastor] Bodický save them. After a while, people assembled at the parish and requested the notary to show them the public funds. It was generally thought that the notary wanted to abscond with the funds. Bodický cooled the crowd's passion, and they went to the council house to check the coffers. Shown that there was more money in the treasury than expected, the crowd calmed down. Bodický's charity was manifested again at the police station, where people surrounded the car filled with suitcases and boxes from outgoing representatives of the old regime.³³

Not satisfied with driving out the notary and his family, Krajné villagers demanded that all Hungarian nobility get out of town. The existing local council dissolved itself on November 5, 1918, allowing the town's Slovak majority, consisting mainly of twentieth century peasants, to govern themselves.

Endnotes

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3. Knox.
4. "Peasant," *Wikipedia* at <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peasant>>.
5. Werner Roesener, *The Peasantry of Europe* (Oxford, K: Blackwell, 1994), p. 18.
6. Roesener, p. 19.
7. "Peasant," *Wikipedia*.
8. Michal Razus, "Land Records in Slovakia, *Naše rodina* 28 (September, 2016), pp. 97, 99-104.
9. Horst Haselsteiner, "Cooperation and Confrontation Between Rulers and the Noble Estates, 1711-1790," in Peter F. Sugar, Péter Hanák, and Tibor Frank (eds.), *A History of Hungary*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 138-164 at p. 153.
10. Eva Somogyi, "The Age of Neoabsolutism, 1849-1867," in Peter F. Sugar, Péter Hanák, and Tibor Frank (eds.), *A History of Hungary*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 235-251, at p. 237.
11. Somogyi, p. 238.
12. Keely Stauter-Halsted, *The Nation in the Village: The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland, 1848-1914* (Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 9.
13. Stauter-Halsted, p. 10.
14. Bernard Wasserstein, *Barbarism & Civilization: A History of Europe in Our Time* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 17.
15. Wasserstein, p. 18.
16. Wasserstein, p. 18.
17. Zuzana Bielikova and Ján Kubíček, *Krajné v spomienkach* [Krajné Memories] (Krajné, Slovakia: City of Krajné, 2010), pp. 9-13.
18. Janos, *The politics of Backwardness in Hungary*, p. 85.
19. Gregory C. Ference, *Sixteen months of indecision: Slovak American Viewpoints toward Compatriots and the Homeland from 1914 to 1915 as Viewed by the Slovak Language Press in Pennsylvania*. (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1995). p. 32.
20. Anton Spiesz, "The Era of a Dual Monarchy (1867-1918), in Ladislaus J. Bolchazy (ed.), *Illustrated Slovak History: A Struggle for Sovereignty in Central Europe* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2006), p. 171.
21. János Bak, "The Late Medieval Period, 1382-1526," in Peter F. Sugar, Péter Hanák, and Tibor Frank (eds.), *A History of Hungary*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 78.
22. Andrew C. Janos, *The politics of Backwardness in Hungary, 1825-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 23.
23. Spiesz, "The Era of a Dual Monarchy (1867-1918), p. 144.
24. The figure was 3 percent according to Miklos Molnar, *A concise history of Hungary* / translated by Anna Magyar. Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, c2001), p. 218. In 1839, it was 5 percent, according to Andrew C. Janos, *The politics of Backwardness in Hungary, 1825-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 18. Frank Tibor puts the number under 1 percent in 1910, Janos, *The politics of Backwardness in Hungary*, p. 275.
25. The figure is 23 percent according to Géza Jeszenszky, "Hungary Through World War I and the End

- of the Dual Monarchy,” in Sugar, Hanák, and Frank, p. 273. It is 27 percent according to Miklos Molnar, *A concise history of Hungary*, p. 218.
26. Zsigmond Móricz, *The Torch (A Fáklya)* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931; originally published in 1917), p. 46.
 27. Móricz, p. 98.
 28. Suzanna Maria Mikula, “Milan Hodža and the Slovak National Movement, 1898-1918,” (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Xerox University Microfilms: Syracuse University, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1974). Pp. 24-25.
 29. Ference, p. 32.
 30. *Ibid.*
 31. Thomas Čapek, *The Slovaks of Hungary, Slavs and Panslavism*, (New York, The Knickerbocker Press, 1906), pp. 165-166.
 32. Ján Lukačka, *Krajné: 1392-1992* (Bratislava: Vytlačili Bratislavaské tlačiarne, 1992), p. 46.
 33. *Ibid.*

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